

# Issues of Merit

A Publication of the Office of Policy and Evaluation, U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board

September 2000

## Director's Perspective

### Federal Career Intern Program: An Opportunity to Make a Difference

Recently the President issued an executive order establishing the Federal Career Intern Program. The order has generated a fair amount of interest as federal agencies await the implementing regulations from the U.S. Office of Personnel Management. A unique feature of the new program provides interns an initial two-year appointment, after which they may be converted to a career appointment—but the hiring agency is not required to do so. If properly used and implemented, the program offers an excellent opportunity to make a real and positive difference in the government's ability to hire and manage an important segment of its workforce.

The degree to which the intern program succeeds in actually attracting exceptional men and women to the federal workforce (the executive order's stated intention) will depend, however, upon how well the program is implemented. The Merit Systems Protection Board's body of research on recruitment, selection, and workforce management practices offers four suggestions for increasing the likelihood of success in such a program:

**1. Start with a good applicant pool that is the result of recruitment efforts that don't cut corners.** Federal managers are eager to hire good people, but given a choice between fast and easy versus better but more time-consuming recruitment practices, managers tend to choose the fast and easy alternative. Selecting officials sometimes argue for the ability to hire from a limited applicant pool—sometimes a pool of one—not because other good applicants can't be found, but because they're satisfied with the applicant on hand and they want to fill the job quickly. MSPB has argued for a better

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## OPE Focus on the Facts

### Belief:

Federal workers have been slow to fully participate in the electronic and information revolutions through Internet-based applications.

### Fact:

More than 85 percent of federal employees say they have ready access to the Internet at work as a source of information, and nearly 62 percent of those use it on a daily basis to assist them in their work.

Source: MSPB Merit Principles Survey 2000

### Length of Time to Fill Jobs: Expectations Are High—and Unmet

As part of MSPB's current study of the merit promotion process, we asked a randomly selected sample of federal supervisors both how long they believe various aspects of a merit promotion action actually take in their organization and how long they think those tasks *should* take. Not unexpectedly, a large majority of the supervisors in our sample (73 percent) said that it takes far too long to fill vacancies in their organizations. Only 13 percent disagreed with this statement.

But what do supervisors define as "taking too long?" The survey responses (see figure 1 on page 3) give us a sense of what our respondents consider reasonable timeframes, along with the time they say it actually takes to fill non-entry level jobs. For example, while 88 percent of the supervisors believe it should take 8 weeks or less to fill jobs when they select external candidates, only 23 percent said that vacancies actually were filled within this time frame. Supervisors also expect surprisingly short turnaround times when their

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balance between expeditious hiring and observing the merit principle of fair and open competition. Certainly, a career intern program that intends to identify exceptional candidates deserves a commitment of resources to develop a robust applicant pool.

**2. Use valid, merit-based screening and placement procedures.** Such procedures should give reasonable assurance that agencies can identify the candidates best suited for the job from a group of well-qualified applicants. However, there appears to be a growing sentiment that managers should be able to make on-the-spot hires when they find well-qualified applicants. We sympathize with that desire and understand that it may be appropriate for some particularly hard-to-fill positions. However, the career intern program outlined in the President's executive order anticipates a more rigorous approach that embodies the statutory principle of selection based on *relative* ability, knowledge, and skills. Development of such procedures that can be applied in a timely manner is an achievable goal that should be given a high priority by OPM and the federal HR community

**3. Make conscious use of the two-year excepted appointment period as an extension of the examining process.** As MSPB previously has noted, one of the best predictors of future job performance is how well an individual actually has performed in the past. In the federal government, cooperative education program appointments give managers the opportunity to observe actual job performance. As a result, co-ops who are offered permanent jobs upon graduation tend to have above average job success. The standard one-year probationary period for federal career-conditional appointees—

which is actually the last stage of the examining process—offers a similar opportunity for supervisors to judge performance before deciding whether an appointee is right for the job. Unfortunately, the probationary period is seldom used that way in practice, and supervisors frequently let the probationary period pass without dismissing marginal or even unsatisfactory employees. An appointment under the new career intern program confers no rights to further federal employment after the two-year appointment expires. A federal agency *may* grant competitive civil service status to a career intern who satisfactorily completes an internship but is under no obligation to do so. Managers should convert only those interns who clearly have demonstrated the potential for a successful career in “analyzing and implementing public programs,” as the executive order terms the work.

**4. Take seriously the requirement for continuing career development of career interns.** With a few notable exceptions, federal agencies tend to do a poor job of developing the careers of their employees. Typically, a lack of resources is cited as a reason. The executive order quite correctly calls for a formal program of training and job assignments to develop the competencies identified as core to the career program. Without such a commitment, this becomes just another way to fill jobs, not a serious intern program.

Given the time and resources that will be needed to make the federal career intern program a success, federal managers might well ask why they should want to hire employees under this program when other hiring methods are quicker and less demanding. One answer lies in the program's potential to create a better, more qualified workforce that will make it easier for agencies to accomplish their missions and provide the best public service possible. Hiring decisions made with that kind of long-term goal in mind are part of

every federal manager's job, and the new intern program promises to be an excellent way to make such strategic options more readily-available to managers for shaping the workforce.

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## Filling Jobs

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selectees are internal candidates. Over 95 percent of the respondents said that in those circumstances, placements should be finalized within 8 weeks and more than half (58 percent) said that these types of actions should be completed in less than one month. Supervisors' expectations with regard to these timeframes frequently leave them disappointed—only 8 percent said that the selection of internal candidates took less than a month and only 46 percent said that it took less than two months.

Although supervisors' desire to have vacancies filled quickly is understandable, their expectations may be unrealistic. For comparison purposes we asked the Corporate Leadership Council, a private sector group that collects information on corporations, to find out something about recruiting in large private sector companies. Among the companies reviewed by CLC none reported an average time of less than six weeks to fill a vacancy. Most reported that the average time was about two months, and several said that it took them from three to five months to fill a job.

Survey responses on the time it takes to complete each step required to fill a federal job provide a perspective on why the process takes as long as it does. The table on page 3 lists these steps and the percentage of supervisors who say that each step is completed in a week or less in their organizations. While it's possible to complete some of these steps simultaneously,

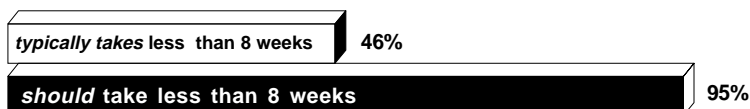
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**Figure 1. Percentage of federal supervisors who say it does take and should take less than 8 weeks to fill jobs in their organization.**

**To fill a non-entry level vacancy with a person not currently working for the organization, it**



**To fill a non-entry level vacancy with an internal candidate, it**



Source: 1999 Merit Promotion Survey data

it's clear that most of them take a week or more in and of themselves. And it's notable that most of our respondents said that the action that takes the longest is getting their personnel office to announce their vacancy.

speedier merit hiring process or that personnel offices need not make efforts to improve their operations. But a more realistic view of the time it takes to complete merit hiring, along with customer-sensitive efforts to improve processing time on the

Percentage of supervisors who say that the action is completed in their organizations in one week or less.

	Percent
Getting approval to fill a vacancy -----	21
Deciding on the appropriate area of consideration -----	56
Getting their personnel office to announce the vacancy -----	6
Developing a rating plan -----	37
Rating and ranking applicants -----	19
Preparing the best-qualified lists -----	34
Interviewing candidates -----	25
Making the final selection -----	59
Obtaining higher level approval of proposed selectees ----	46
Notifying the selectee and getting him/her on board -----	21

Source: 1999 Merit Promotion Survey data

This information suggests that while it may be possible for personnel offices to improve their timeliness on recruitment and placement actions, supervisors may also need to adjust their expectations. Given the time needed to complete most of the actions shown in the table above and the experience of private sector organizations, it's probably unrealistic for supervisors to assume that filling a vacancy in their organizations can be done in a month or less—or even two months in many organizations. This is not to suggest that supervisors don't have legitimate reasons for wanting a

more than half of the supervisors surveyed indicated that they don't mind a lengthy hiring process if the result is a high quality employee.

## Most Feds Not Active in Politics

Despite the easing of Hatch Act restrictions in 1993—and notwithstanding the presence of off-duty federal workers at this summer's nominating conventions—overall federal worker participation in partisan politics is relatively low.

According to the results of a governmentwide MSPB survey administered earlier this year, only around 11 percent of federal employees participated in legally permissible partisan political activity during the two years preceding the survey.

It may well be that the number of federal workers active in partisan politics has grown since the Hatch Act revisions, but the percentage who are active is well below the percentage who had earlier said they would like to get more involved in politics. In MSPB surveys administered in 1989 and 1992, we asked federal employees if they'd like the law to allow them to be more active in partisan political activities. Both times the question was asked, about 30 percent of survey participants indicated they would like to be able legally to be more politically active. But in response to an item in the Board's 1996 version of the survey, under 7 percent of the respondents said they actually had become more active in partisan activities since some Hatch Act prohibitions had been lifted.

The kinds of partisan politics that federal workers are permitted to engage in include active membership in political parties and active participation in political rallies and meetings, holding office in political parties or clubs, making campaign speeches for candidates in partisan elections, and distributing campaign literature in partisan elections. Federal employees must be off duty when they engage in these activities and are not permitted to participate in partisan activities while in a government office, while wearing an official uniform, or while using a government vehicle. They're also not allowed to wear political buttons while on the job, although they may have bumper stickers on their own cars, even if those cars are parked on government property or in agency-subsidized parking lots.

While these political activities remain open to most federal em-

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employees, partisan political activity is still off limits for workers in certain federal agencies, and for employees in certain job categories, no matter what agency employs them. For example, employees of the Office of the Special Counsel, MSPB, the CIA, the Defense Intelligence Agency, and a number of law enforcement agencies are not allowed to participate in partisan politics, nor are administrative law judges, SES members, or contract appeals boards in any agency. Nevertheless, workers in restricted categories may express opinions about candidates, contribute money to political organizations, be present at political fund-raisers, and join political parties, but they're still not allowed to do things such as distributing campaign material, making campaign speeches, or holding office in political parties.

## Federal HR Organizations Not Fulfilling Expected Roles

In a recent survey, federal supervisors and managers provided a picture of what they think about the importance of the potential roles of their human resources organizations, and whether their HR organizations actually fulfill those roles. Of the five roles listed—business partner, subject matter expert, employee champion,

management champion, and change agent—our respondents demonstrated the highest level of agreement on the role of subject matter expert: 88 percent said this role was very important. The roles of business partner and management champion each were seen by a little over half of these respondents as very important. As the chart below shows, however, there's a marked discrepancy between what the survey participants identified as important roles and the roles they believe their HR organizations actually fulfill. For each role listed, the percentage of supervisors and managers who view it as very important exceeds the percentage who see their HR organizations as fulfilling those roles. For example, although 45 percent of respondents believe that the role of employee champion is a very important one for the HR organization, less than one-third of them see their own HR organizations as employee champions.

It's encouraging that a sizable proportion of these managers view their HR organizations as a source of subject matter expertise—and given years of downsizing in the HR area, this might even be considered a significant accomplishment. Nonetheless, HR organizations apparently haven't been as successful with regard to the other roles they might play in furthering the organization's mission accomplishment. This finding serves to reiterate a point the Board has

often made: if HR is to truly gain a seat at the table for the purposes of strategic planning and organizational decisionmaking, it must not only convince managers that all these roles are appropriate for HR, but must also demonstrate that

HR is capable of fulfilling these roles.

The survey, which was administered by MSPB in collaboration with the National Academy of Public Administration, was completed by over 600 members of our standing panel of managers and supervisors. While panel survey results do not necessarily represent the views of all federal supervisors and managers, they provide useful insights into workforce perceptions on important HR issues.

## Survey Looks at Family-Friendly Programs

MSPB's governmentwide Merit Principles Survey 2000 recently gave us the opportunity to discover the extent to which federal employees are aware of family-friendly initiatives and how important each of these initiatives is to them personally.

We found that availability and employee awareness of programs varies considerably, depending on the program. For example, almost all employees reported that sick leave for family care is available, and only 5 percent are not aware of whether they have access to that program. On the other hand, only 9 percent of survey participants reported that elder care referral services are available, while 53 percent said such services are not available. However, a sizable minority—39 percent—didn't know or weren't sure whether elder care referral is available where they work. The greatest level of awareness is for programs mandated by law or regulation (e.g., sick leave for family care), and for programs directly affecting large numbers of employees, such as flexible hours.

Detailed analyses of survey results indicate that availability of the programs varies from agency to agency, and employees in field offices reported much lower availability of the programs than employees in headquarters installations. Often,

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Supervisors' views of HR roles and their importance		
Role	Percentage rating role "very important"	Percentage who see HR filling this role
Subject matter (administrative) expert	88	75
Business partner	58	49
Management champion	53	43
Employee champion	45	31
Change agent	36	23
Source: managers and supervisors standing panel survey, 2000		



Percentage of employees reporting the availability and importance of family-friendly programs				
Family-friendly program	Is the program available to you at work?			How important is each program to you personally?
	Yes	No	Don't know/not sure	
Sick leave for family care	91	4	5	85
Leave sharing	75	11	15	51
Flexible work schedule	75	24	2	86
Employee assistance programs	67	9	25	54
Compressed work schedule	63	33	4	71
On/near site child care	33	45	22	23
Part-time work schedules	26	49	25	26
Child care referral services	24	47	29	22
Commuter fare subsidies	21	52	28	36
Telecommuting	20	63	17	47
Job sharing	10	55	35	20
Elder care referral services	9	53	39	24
Note: Percents may not total 100 due to rounding				
Source: MSPB Merit Principles Survey 2000				

such differences in availability can be attributed to the nature and location of work, the demographics of the workforce, special needs of the agencies, or other legitimate factors.

Not unexpectedly, the perceived importance of family-friendly programs also varies widely. Alternative work schedules and use of sick leave for family care were rated important by the vast majority of employees. Leave-sharing and employee assistance programs were rated important by about half. Women, minorities, younger employees, and lower-graded employees were the most likely to rate family-friendly programs important. The table above shows what the survey participants reported to us on the availability and importance of these programs.

It's clear from these findings that family-friendly programs are important to a very large number of federal workers. Indeed, in recent years, both private and public sector organizations have begun to recognize the important role that a family-friendly workplace plays in attracting and retaining employees. Family-friendly policies are a particularly important tool for government employers who may not be able to offer

fits that enhance the quality of work life and help federal employees balance the demands of their jobs with the needs of their families. Further, our survey results should prompt installation managers to review the availability of family-friendly programs in their own jurisdictions to ensure that the programs are not being denied their employees unnecessarily.

The Board's survey findings with regard to family-friendly programs expand the government's knowledge about the balance of work and family life, which also was the subject of a recent OPM report, "Achieving a Balance: Meeting Work and Family Obligations." That report presents conclusions drawn by OPM about the availability of seven family-friendly programs at the installations scheduled for OPM oversight evaluations from May 1998 through September 1999.

To learn more about MSPB's survey (which covers many aspects of federal employment in addition to family-friendly programs) you can visit <http://www.mspb.gov/studies/survey2000.html>. We plan to publish additional findings from our survey later this year.

salaries as attractive as their private sector counterparts, and therefore need other strategies that will make federal service the employment of choice.

It behooves the government, then, to make family-friendly programs available to the extent possible, and to keep its workers and potential workers well aware of policies and bene-

## Schools' PMI Nominating Processes Vary Widely

As the government launches its new Federal Career Intern Program (See *Director's Perspective*, page 1), MSPB is in the process of conducting a study of another special hiring tool, the Presidential Management Intern (PMI) Program.

To learn about the PMI hiring process we administered a survey to 1997, 1998, and 1999 program participants. The results of the survey revealed considerable differences in the nomination methods used by various schools, some of which employed almost no screening process, while others used very elaborate mechanisms for nominating students for the program. Some 57 percent of the PMIs reported that their schools had used graduate school grades to nominate them for the program. The next most common methods used were recommendations from professors and requiring students to write essays (reported by 44 and 38 percent of the PMIs, respectively). Oral presentations—reported by only 6 percent of the PMIs—appear to be the rarest among the various nominating processes.

We also asked PMIs their views on how competitive they thought their nominating processes had been. The survey participants generally regarded essays and oral presentations as fairly competitive: over half the students who had made oral presentations considered the process very competitive, and 44 percent of those who were required to write essays held similar views. Not as many PMIs thought that nominations based on grades or professors' recommendation were competitive. Thirty-five percent of those who were nominated based on grades thought this was a very competitive process, while a quarter thought the same about their professors' recommendations.

A full report on the results of the PMI study is expected next spring.



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# Issues of Merit

A Publication of the Office of Policy and Evaluation, U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board

## Selected Publications from the Office of Policy and Evaluation \*

- ☐ Competing for Federal Jobs: Job Search Experiences of New Hires
- ☐ Restoring Merit to Federal Hiring: Why Two Special Hiring Programs Should Be Ended
- ☐ The Role of Delegated Examining Units: Hiring New Employees in a Decentralized Civil Service
- ☐ Federal Supervisors and Poor Performers
- ☐ Civil Service Evaluation: the Evolving Role of the U.S. Office of Personnel Management
- ☐ Federal Supervisors and Strategic Human Resources Management
- ☐ The Changing Federal Workplace: Employee Perspectives
- ☐ Adherence to the Merit Principles in the Workplace: Federal Employees' Views
- ☐ Achieving a Representative Workforce: Addressing the Barriers to Hispanic Participation
- ☐ Fair and Equitable Treatment: A Progress Report on Minority Employment in the Federal Government
- ☐ The Rule of Three in Federal Hiring: Boon or Bane?
- ☐ Sexual Harassment in the Federal Workplace: Trends, Progress, Continuing Challenges
- ☐ Leadership for Change: Human Resource Development in the Federal Government
- ☐ Temporary Federal Employment: In Search of Flexibility and Fairness
- ☐ Whistleblowing in the Federal Government: An Update
- ☐ A Question of Equity: Women and the Glass Ceiling in the Federal Government

## Selected Current Projects

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|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> OPM 20-year retrospective              | <input type="checkbox"/> Governmentwide Merit Principles Survey 2000 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Merit promotion                        | <input type="checkbox"/> Presidential Management Interns             |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Selection tools used in federal hiring | <input type="checkbox"/> Alternative delivery of HR services         |

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\* **Most of these reports can be downloaded from the STUDIES page of the MSPB website: [mspb.gov](http://mspb.gov)**

"Issues of Merit" provides findings and recommendations drawn from MSPB research on topics and issues relevant to the effective operation of the federal merit systems and the significant actions of the Office of Personnel Management.